

# The Singh Sabha Movement

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The Singh Sabha Movement, which enjoyed the leadership of the Sikhs for nearly half a century (1873-1920), will go down in the history of modern Punjab as the greatest socio-religious reform movement of the Sikhs. It came as a strong rejuvenating force at a time when Sikhism was in danger of losing its distinctive identity. But for the efforts made by the Singh Sabha, Sikhism could have been absorbed into Hinduism as one of its sects – the fate that has befallen many other religions in India. A contemporary observer noted: “Just as we do not see any Buddhists in the country except in images, in the same fashion the Sikhs – who are now everywhere distinctive in their turbans and their other religious forms like wrist bangles and swords – will be seen only in pictures in museums. Their own sons and grandsons, clad in coats and trousers and sporting mushroom-like caps, would go to see them in museums and say, in their pidgin Punjabi: ‘Look, that is the picture of a Sikh – the tribe that inhabited this country once upon a time.’”

This was the state of affairs before the advent of the Singh Sabha. The Sikh religion had practically lost its vitality. Devoid of its characteristic features, it had become a prey to Brahmanical Hinduism. Under the deadweight of meaningless rites and rituals, dogmas and superstitions, the socio-religious fabric of the community had been damaged beyond recognition.

## **Low Morale:**

Owing to ignorance of the great spiritual legacy left by the Gurus, the number of Sikhs embracing the other faiths was increasing steadily. The proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries in the 19th century also alarmed the Sikhs. The historic conversions of Maharaja Duleep Singh and Raja Harnam Singh of Kapurthala came as a rude shock to the Sikhs. The Sikh youth, who studied in the Missionary schools, also came under Christian influence and considered the observance of Sikh religious formalities as irksome and out of fashion. The low-caste Sikhs, like their counterparts of the other communities, were more vulnerable to the Christian influence. They were attracted towards the new faith due to the lure of employment opportunities and better social status. The loss of political power (Punjab was annexed by the British in 1849) also had a demoralizing effect on the Sikhs. The spread of Western education and science posed a new challenge, provoked self-analysis and called for a synthesis between the fast-spreading Western values and India's splendid past. It was at this juncture that the Singh Sabha assumed leadership of the Sikhs.

The previous reform movements among the Sikhs, the Nirankari and the Namdhari, had no doubt done the spadework of reform but they never rose to such dimensions as to affect the entire Sikh community. Like the Bedi and the Sodhi descendants of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, the Nirankaris and the Namdharis came to have a succession of Gurus. Both these movements acquired a schismatic character because of their failure to do away with the institution of gurudom. This resulted in a multiplication of cults, sects and philosophies. Rivalry between different sects led to confusion and split the community into different sects, each claiming to be superior to the others. In this welter of confusion, the vital question agitating the minds of the Sikhs was: What is meant by Sikhism? Despite their best efforts, the Nirankaris and the Namdharis had failed to give any definite answer to this question.

## **Ambiguity:**

The Sikhs were mainly divided into two sections – one regarded Sikhism as a distinct faith, while the other thought it to be an offshoot or a branch of Hinduism. The number of Sikhs, who did not think it incumbent to follow the code of conduct prescribed by the Tenth Sikh Guru, was increasing steadily. This was due to propaganda in certain quarters that the religious symbols of the Sikhs had lost their significance. The Singh Sabha played a significant role in the socio-religious regeneration of the Sikh community. It made the Sikhs aware of their great spiritual and cultural heritage, of their being the “Khalsa” – the pure. It welded them into an independent community, bound together by faith in the teachings of their Gurus, distinct social laws, customs and language. Just as the keynote of the Arya Samaj was “Back to the Vedas”, the keynote of the Singh Sabha was “Back to the Guru Granth”. The object was to restore the pristine purity of Sikhism by abolishing later accretions and superstitious practices, which did not stand the test of reason and which did not have any place in the teachings of the Gurus.

The Singh Sabha invested the Sikhs with a modern outlook. It infused a new spirit in them to revive their sacred traditions, to seek fresh impulses and to strive for progress in all spheres of life – religious, social, cultural and educational. While the Nirankari and the Namdhari movements were known for their exclusive reliance on the indigenous sources of inspiration, the Singh Sabha, under the guidance of the Sikh intelligentsia, studied the problem of reform in the light of western influences. Unlike the Namdharis, the Singh Sabha leaders thankfully acknowledged the advantages offered to them by the British civilization and urged the Sikhs to join their countrymen in seeking to assimilate the merits of Western thought and scholarship. They rightly felt that the prejudice against Western ideas had stood in the way of the progress of the community in the past. The Namdharis had gone to the extent of boycotting not only the modern education but also posts and telegraphs.

The Singh Sabha Movement was a part of the great Indian renaissance of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, whose leaders came to believe that the values of the East and the West, instead of coming into conflict with one another, should make a happy and harmonious blending. The Singh Sabha leaders extolled the merits of British rule for bringing about many innovations. They realized the necessity of adopting all that was best in the Western thought, without impairing the essence of Sikhism. The leaders evinced keen interest in the spreading of modern education amongst the Sikhs. They spread a network of educational institutions which aimed at providing such opportunities to the Sikhs as would help them in acquiring modern education combined with the advantage of instruction in the Sikh religion, Sikh history, Sikh literature and the Gurmukhi script.

#### **Significant Achievement :**

The establishment of the Khalsa College at Amritsar, in 1892, was a significant achievement of the Singh Sabha. There was also a plan to develop this into a Sikh university on the pattern of Banaras Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University, but it could not materialize for want of funds. The annual Sikh Education Conferences helped a great deal in spreading education among the Sikhs. Within a brief span of a few decades the percentage of literacy of the Sikhs considerably increased and the number of schools and colleges multiplied at an astonishing speed. The Singh Sabha sought the cooperation of distinguished Englishmen in their educational campaign.

The Singh Sabha leaders worked tirelessly for the removal of caste prejudices, the emancipation of women, the eradication of non-Sikh practices like polygamy, child marriage and female infanticide and promoted simplification of social ceremonies from birth to death. They helped the Sikhs in building a new social order purged of all alien influences. The passing of the Anand Marriage Act, in 1909, legalizing the Sikh form of marriage, was a

significant achievement of the Singh Sabha. The Singh Sabha issued a large number of books and tracts dealing with Sikh rituals and ceremonies, covering the whole range of social life right from birth to death, as also the manner of their performance in accordance with the tenets of the Sikh faith.

In their political outlook, the Singh Sabha leaders were moderates, believing in the efficacy of constitutional methods. They eschewed violence and took care to avoid clashing with the Government. Like the moderate wing of the Congress of that period, they adopted the method of reasoned representation in order to impress upon the Government the urgency of their demands. They often sent memoranda to the Government on such issues affecting the Sikhs, as the development of Punjabi, representation of the Sikhs in civil services. They also endeavoured to secure political concessions for the Sikhs through peaceful persuasion.

**Where it Differed:**

The Singh Sabha Movement essentially differed from the other contemporary movements in character and organizational approach. The movements like the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission among the Hindus and the Wahabi and the Ahmadiya among the Muslims all derived their inspiration from their respective founders. In each case, the individual leader was the sole guiding authority and his word was Law. All these movements aimed at uniting the divergent elements of their respective faiths but were ultimately reduced to petty cults and sects. The same had been the case with the Nirankari and the Namdhari movements among the Sikhs.

It goes to the credit of the Singh Sabha Movement that it remained democratic and non-sectarian in letter and spirit till the very end. It was a mass upsurge and it had the unique distinction of not being founded by one single individual. The Singh Sabha leaders aimed at restoring the purity of the Sikh faith without propounding any philosophy of their own. Any Sikh, who adhered to the injunctions of the Ten Gurus and was ready to serve the community, could be admitted to the fold of the Singh Sabha. There was no ceremony to be gone through for this purpose nor was there any distinctive dress, badge or mark to be worn. The movement retained its democratic character despite the efforts of some of its leaders to style themselves as gurus and wield absolute control over its affairs.

**New Class**

The tide of popularity of the Singh Sabha Movement, however, ebbed with the rise of a new English-educated middle class among the Sikhs. This new class had strong political ambition and was militant in approach. The common zeal for reform which had united the Sikhs to work under the leadership of the Singh Sabha disappeared with a growing feeling among this new generation of the Sikhs that the movement had failed to satisfy the political aspirations of the Sikhs. As the whole of India was awakening to a new political consciousness, this new class of the Sikhs, which came to be known as Akalis, clashed openly with the Government, first for the liberation of their shrines and then for the liberation of their land.

The orientation imparted by the Singh Sabha Movement to the Sikh thought and character retains its validity till the present times. But the Sikhs today are confronted with more or less the same old challenges which they had faced at the time of the birth of the Singh Sabha Movement.



## Importance of the Singh Sabha Movement

After the annexation of Punjab fear gripped the Sikhs, what were the British going to do with their faith, their traditions and way of life? But as history has shown the threat did not come from the British, it was from a lot closer to home. It was due to scheming Brahmanical groups and Hindu influences that the Singh Sabha movement was created and gathered momentum.

Other groups had established themselves, like the Nirankaries, Radhasoamies and Namdharies but they had their own agendas. They had no set goals for the community and rather emphasised the ritual aspects. They had little or no impact. There were fundamental differences between these groups and mainstream Sikhism and this led to these groups breaking away.

These problems were little compared to the Brahmenical influences. At the time of the late 1800's it was clear that certain areas of Sikhism were lapsing back into Hinduism. Sikhs who had recently converted were now returning to the Hindu fold uncertain of the future of Sikhism. A British observer Sir Richard Temple commented "Sikhism is on the decline, a spent force, the Sikhs are the most uneducated people in the Punjab." The British exploited the lack of political knowledge of the Sikhs by setting up Christian missionaries. They also opened a Christian missionary school in the holy city of Amritsar, striking at the very heart of Sikhism. Lower class Sikhs who were tired of the way they were treated by the Sikh leaders converted to Christianity. High numbers of Sikhs were changing their faith so soon into British imperialism. It was not only the poor Sikhs who were converting, many well off Sikhs with great political and social leverage moved over to Christianity due to enticements of government posts and hefty pensions.

The British intentions were clearcut but the Hindus were more scheming and made the boldest religious moves during this period. In 1875 a Hindu group calling themselves Arya Samaj, led by Swami Dayanand started making bold and derogatory statements about the Sikhs. Their main belief was that all religions and faiths were simply a branch of Hinduism. Hinduism is like an ocean which all rivers flow to. All their beliefs were centred around the book of Vedas. Swami Dayanand denounced Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji and labelled the Guru's and Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji as having little importance.

The sect was growing in popularity within Punjab and it was apparent to all Sikhs that this group was here to stay and was seeking to eradicate the Sikh faith through lies and accusations or by any means possible. The problem with the Sikhs was that they were by and large leaderless, there was no control of the religion, there were no institutions, no custodians. Other faiths like Christianity, Islam and Hinduism had schools of faith and learning centres. Schools where children could be nurtured, raised within the fold of the faith. This was not the case with the helpless Sikhs.

This was the origin of the Singh Sabha movement. The society described itself as Singh Sabha, founded in Amritsar 1872, it set out to protect the Sikhism from invading interests. The Singh Sabha held meeting and led protest marches against the Hindu 'anti-Sikh' orators. The group organised meeting to educate Sikhs of the values of Sikhism which had been dented and neglected, to reveal the teachings of the Guru's. The Singh Sabha also started the production of religious literature and laid the foundations of a campaign against illiteracy.

A few years later in 1879 a branch of Singh Sabha was founded in Lahore. The leaders were educated, energetic, middle class and politically aware. **Bhai Gurmukh Singh**, a professor at the Oriental College of Lahore was its secretary. He brought into the movement two veteran

preachers , **Bhai Ditt Singh Giani** and **Bhai Jawara Singh**. Both of these preachers became extremely popular due to their sincerity of belief in the true doctrine of the Guru's and their sense of mission and zeal to serve their faith. Inspired by Gurmukh Singh , Bhai Ditt Singh devoted his whole time to propagate the Sikh faith, writing over 25 books to dispel ignorance about the religion and its history. During this time **Bhai Kanh Singh of Nabha**, a notable scholar was contacted . Bhai Kanh Singh wrote various books on Sikhism, his most notable work being **Mahan Kosh** (encyclopaedia of Sikhism) and *Ham Hindu Nahi* (We are not Hindus). Bhai Vir Singh founded the Khalsa Tract Society , he contributed to the purity of Sikh thought and instilled faith the the Khalsa traditions by writing various books, his most famous being *Kalghidar Chamatkaar*.

The governor of Punjab Sir Robert Egerton became the patron of the Singh Sabha. The Singh Sabha began to open in towns and villages and started to send out missionaries to remoter parts of the region. They also formed alliances with Sikh regiments and increased the production of the religious literature. It was at this time that the Sikhs felt an urgent need to have a translation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji in English.

After a hectic search Bhai Gurmukh Singh persuaded Mr **Max Arthur Macauliffe** of the Indian civil service working as a divisional judge to undertake the task on behalf of the Sikh community. Both moral and financial support was given. Under the guidance of Bhai Kanh Singh, Mr Macauliffe spent the next 15 years translating Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. By 1909 the great work was complete and published by the Oxford University press.

In 1883 the Amritsar and Lahore Singh Sabhas tried to merge but were unsuccessful. The reason of the failure was the stark contrast between the two groups. On one hand there was the Amritsar group led by Baba Khem Singh, who did little to help the lower castes and suffered from having strong ideals in elitism. On the other hand the Lahore group was more radical and pro-lower caste. They were more democratic and believed in equality and representation. The contrast between the two was obvious and the Amritsar Singh Sabha refused links with the Lahore group.

This dispute turned nasty and open hostility broke out between the two groups, this resulted with Baba Khem Singh taking Giani Ditt Singh to court over a play he had written called *Swapan Natak* (The Dream Play) which was thought to be a veiled attack on Baba Khem Singh. In due course most of the Singh Sabhas and devout Sikhs came to realise the righteous stand taken by the Lahore group and Gurmukh Singh and Bhai Ditt Singh for the Singh cause.

This dispute simply helped the Arya Samajists, with their leader venting out anti-sikh rhetoric. The threat was real and realising this the two groups merged. Through the Khalsa Diwan it was desired to set up a Sikh college. Cleverly the Singh Sabha aligned themselves with the British in order to gain funds for their educational programme. Some British well wishers even raised money through committees in England. In 1892 enough money was raised to lay the foundation stone of the Khalsa College. The college made the teaching of Gurmukhi and Sikh scripture compulsory. The college was founded with the notion to challenge the 'anti-Sikh' wave that Punjab was harbouring.

The original founders of the Singh Sabha Movement were sanatan or 'Traditional' Sikhs believing that the paanth certainly consisted of the followers of the Gurus, but had no problem with the Hindu traditions that were creeping in. There were the Sabha of Amritsar of 1873.

The radical Sikhs were the Tat Khalsa centred at Lahore. For the Tat Khalsa it was impossible to be a Hindu and A Sikh, as those of the Sanatan persuasion maintained. The only correct style for a

Sikh was that of a Khalsa and although they did not cast out the non-Khalsa variety, they explicitly adopted the view that those non-Khalsa Sikhs were on their way to becoming fully fledged Sikh. In other words they were said to be aspiring to become members of the Khalsa, that is they were Sehaj-dhari 's or slow learners.

Ultimately the victory went to the Tat Khalsa and since the early years of the twentieth century Sikhs have been progressively learning three things. First, Sikhs are no Hindus, secondly Khalsa membership should be the objective of all Sikhs and thirdly, the Khalsa membership requires obedience to the Rehat.

Founders of the Sanatan movement were predominantly conservative Sikhs, concerned to sustain and protect the society in which they had been nurtured, this was a society which permitted a variety of Sikh identities and different modes of worship. The Tat Khalsa strongly disagreed with the actions of the Amritsar Singh Sabha. Those with radical opinion drew strength from the educational developments in Lahore. For the Tat Khalsa Sikhism could not possibly be as broad as Sanatan Sikhs believed. Emphatically Sikhs were not Hindus, and Hindu tradition was not what Sikhs should follow.

Sikh values were propagated through Punjabi newspapers, the Khalsa Tract Society and the Khalsa Diwan. In 1899 the weekly journal Khalsa Akbar was started. The main goal of this publication was to educate Sikhs about politics and Sikh history. Over the course of time more and more Sikhs saw the merits of the view point of the Lahore Singh Sabha and threw their lot with it. With pressure applied by the Sikh masses, idols that had been placed in the precincts of the Golden Temple in the days of the Hindu onslaught were removed. Later, in 1920 the practice of caste discrimination in the Golden Temple was stopped, due to pressure from the masses the priests had no option but to accept all offerings from all people.

Notable Sikh thinkers and leaders who contributed to restore the Sikh faith to its original Khalsa traditions and pristine purity were Professor Gurmukh Singh, Bhai Dit Singh, Bhai Jawahra Singh, Giani Gian Singh, Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Kanh Singh Nabha and Sundar Singh Majithia.

**Bhai Vir Singh** (1872 –1957) was a great poet, a scholar and a very spiritual person. Through his writings he brought awareness of the glory of the Guru's and the Khalsa to the Sikh masses. His writings in Punjabi are famous all over India. From his pen came the best novels of the Punjabi language. He wrote historical and philosophical essays, he was the force behind the cultural renaissance in the Punjab at the turn of the century. He was conferred the degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning Honoris Causa in 1949 by Punjab University. He was honoured with the Sahitya Academy Award in 1955 and the Padam Bhushan in 1956 for his contributions of Punjabi literature. Bhai Vir Singh was the force behind the Singh Sabha movements literary output which was so important in awakening the Sikh masses. His earlier written novels like **Sundari**, **Vijay Singh**, **Santwant Kaur** and **Baba Naudh Singh** have to be viewed with reference to the social and political conditions of the end of the nineteenth century. Their central theme was heroism and chivalry of the Sikhs and the ethical excellence of the religion. The novels brought out the pristine glory of the Khalsa in contrast to the servility of the Hindu masses and the oppression of the Pathan and Mughal rulers.

Bhai Vir Singh then turned his attention to explaining the Sikh scriptures in his weekly paper, the Khalsa Samachar. He also wrote poems which gave him a most honoured place among Punjabi poets.

Thereafter he wrote biographies of the Sikh Guru's: **Kalgidhar Chamatkar**, the life of Guru Gobind Singh Ji and **Guru Nanak Chamatkar**, the life of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Bhai Vir Singh Ji was dedicated to the cause of reform, he propagated the cause of education by building schools and colleges and was a founder director of the Punjab and Sind Bank, which greatly helped in uplifting the Sikh economy.

The main goals of the Singh Sabha movement was clear and uncompromising. To uplift the Sikhs in all spheres, be it political, social, moral or economic. The propagation of the Guru's divine word, carrying of his teaching to the highest level. The removal of illiteracy and the spread of education regardless of caste or creed. The protection of political rights for the Sikhs and the removal of their grievances through constitutional methods. This was the backbone of the Singh Sabha movement , a movement that gained much attraction and gave Sikhs a role within their religion. It was the Singh Sabha movement that poured water over the rampage of Hinduism in the Punjab. It was Singh Sabha that halted the slide of Sikhism into unretreavable waters and it was Singh Sabha that made the Sikhs feel proud to be Sikhs again.